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WOODEN SPOIL

By Victor Rousseau

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

CHAPTER I.

The Rosny White Elephant.

The office in Quebec which Georges Lamartine, the notary, occupied was located inconspicuously in a small building in an old part of the Lower Town. Small, wiry, black-haired, with an air of unconvincing plausibility about him, Monsieur Lamartine was seated at his desk, drumming his fingers, staring out of the window, and turning again to look at a letter signed Hilary Askew, when his boy brought him a card with the same name upon it. Monsieur Lamartine frowned.

"Tell Monsieur Askew that I am busy with an important court case," he said. "Ask him to call at this time tomorrow."

"Mr. Askew says he's busy, too, and he'll wait," announced the boy, returning.

The notary considered. "Well, tell him I'll see him in a few minutes," he answered.

When the boy was gone he took down the telephone receiver and gave a number.

"Is that you, Brousseau?" he asked. "Monsieur Hilary Askew has turned up."

There was a sputtering at the other end of the line which made the notary smile.

"I can't say. I haven't seen him yet," said Monsieur Lamartine, in answer. "But if I can't send him home with a smile on his lips and a check in his pocket I shall try to keep him in Quebec until I have seen you. And you'd better try to get Morris by long distance and warn him. Good-by."

He hung up the receiver, rang for the boy and told him to admit Mr. Askew. Then he rose to receive his visitor.

He looked at Hilary keenly as he shook hands with him. The young man was different from what he had expected. He was about as big, and he had the same air of American energy; but he appeared more determined, he looked like one of those uncomfortable men who have the knack of disentangling themselves from sophistries. However, Hilary looked good-natured. And he was certainly inexperienced. Monsieur Lamartine gave him a chair and looked very plausible indeed.

"Your visit has followed very close upon your letter, Mr. Askew," he said. "Perhaps you did not get mine, advising you to wait before coming to Quebec?"

"No," said Hilary, "but I would have come anyway. I want to get this matter settled."

"The American haste," said the notary looking almost ingenuous. "But the law is not to be taken by storm, least of all in Quebec. It is only a month since your uncle died. Perhaps it will be months before we can turn over the property to you. I understand that you were not in close touch with your uncle during his latter years?"

"I hadn't seen him since I was a boy. That was what made the legacy a surprising one. He had not shown any interest in me. I had a hard fight to get through my forestry course. So when I heard that I had become the owner of a tract of a hundred square miles it seemed like an intervention of Providence. That is almost a kingdom, sir."

"Ten miles by ten?" inquired the notary, smiling. "Well, I suppose it does seem a large territory to you, although the Rosny seigniory was one of the smallest of the old feudal grants. It is almost the last on the north shore of the St. Lawrence that remains in the hands of the original family."

"Four hundred thousand dollars seems a big sum for my uncle to have paid for it," said Hilary.

"Your uncle," said Monsieur Lamartine, beginning to drum softly, "made this investment against the advice of a good many people. The Rosny timber rights are practically valueless, because the wood is principally balsam fir instead of pine and spruce."

He noted that Hilary only watched him instead of answering, and he began to feel that he would not be disposed of as easily as he had anticipated.

"The property has never begun to pay its way," continued Monsieur Lamartine. "Your uncle paid three hundred and fifty thousand for the cutting rights alone. He found himself up against the law which places a limit on the size of trees. Seven inches for black, or swamp spruce, I believe; twelve for white spruce; twelve or thirteen for pine. And nearly all the trees on the Rosny limits that aren't fir are under the legal size. Your uncle sank half his fortune in it. He was—excuse me—eccentric. This is the case: the timber cannot be cut except at a loss, on account of its sparseness and the high cost of transportation. The balsam fir is too gummy to make any but inferior paper, below the standard even of the newspapers. It occupies the greater portion of the tract, together with second growth birch, which is, of course, of use only for firewood. The expenses are very considerable. In short, Mr. Askew, I cannot advise you to consider your uncle's legacy seriously."

"I'm sorry to hear that," answered Hilary. "But I suppose something can be done with the wood. There are uses besides pulp-wood to which the timber can be put?"

Monsieur Lamartine drummed his fingers for quite a while before answering.

"A company with a large capital might find it commercially profitable to develop your tract," he said presently. "But no man without an ample fortune and a thorough knowledge of lumber conditions in this province could dream of pulling out even."

Hilary leaned forward in his chair. "Monsieur Lamartine," he said, "I'll tell you how I view this matter. I didn't build any extravagant hopes upon my uncle's legacy. I'm not constructed that way. What I want principally is to settle somewhere among trees and do something with them. I'm tired of what I've been doing these past five years.

"I'm tired of hunting a job here and a job there to tend somebody else's trees. I'm tired of other people's trees. I want my own trees. I want to see them grow up, and thin them out, and have a real forest in bearing.

"So I've decided to take hold of that St. Boniface tract and see what I can make of it. I'm going to show my uncle, Monsieur Lamartine, that he sized me up wrong."

Monsieur Lamartine smiled at his caller's frankness.

"I understand how you feel, Mr. Askew," he said. "What you want is a nice little tract of a few hundred acres, not far from Quebec. A place with a little trout lake on it, to build your camp beside, ten acres freehold and the rest leased. You'll enjoy that, and"—he paused and scrutinized him with his fox look—"I think I may be able to dispose of the Rosny white elephant for you."

Hilary returned no answer, and Monsieur Lamartine could not decide

Monsieur Lamartine Could Not Decide Whether It Was a Sign of Strength or Weakness.

whether it was a sign of strength or of weakness. Still he was sure that a man who loved trees apart from their commercial value was a dreamer and unpractical.

"They would pay forty-five thousand dollars, cash," said the notary. "And that would enable you to realize your own aspirations. You are fond of fishing, Mr. Askew? Think it over. Spend a week here—two weeks. Look about you. Inspect our fine old city. Do you know we are the only walled city on this continent?"

He stopped; perhaps he saw Hilary redden, perhaps his instinct warned him to do so.

"What I want," said Hilary, "is the Rosny tract."

"The offer is too small? I doubt—"

"I will discuss that after I have seen the concession."

The notary sighed. "Well, at least think the matter over for a while," he said. "Mr. Morris, the manager, is away on business. He should be in Quebec tomorrow, and perhaps he can arrange to take you up there."

"I am thinking of going at a very early date," said Hilary, "in fact, by the boat tomorrow."

"Mr. Askew, I assure you, you had better wait for Mr. Morris. He is a man of expert judgment. You cannot have a better adviser, and he has absolutely no personal interest one way or another. There are so many things to consider; and then—you don't speak French, do you?"

"A little."

"It would not help you, anyway. The dialect up at St. Boniface is seventeenth century. They are a wild lot up there, a very bad lot of people; smugglers and poachers, Mr. Askew."

Hilary, who had already sensed Lamartine's objection to his going to St. Boniface, awakened to suspicion at last. "I shall leave on tomorrow morning's boat," he said. "When I have made my decision I shall let you know. I think I shall refuse your company's offer. Will you let me have the papers, Monsieur Lamartine, including the last half-yearly statement and the map of the limits?"

"But it is entirely irregular, Mr. Askew. Really—"

"Let me have the papers, please," said Hilary, smiling. "And you need have no fear that you will be held responsible for my anticipating my inheritance. I imagine I have as much right there as Mr. Morris."

"Of course, if that is your decision, there is nothing more to say," answered the other brusquely. He pulled out a drawer and removed an envelope containing some documents. "You will find the statement here," he said. "Mr. Morris has the books and the map of St. Boniface. I wish you a pleasant journey, sir. You wish me to continue to represent you?"

"For the present, yes. Good-day."

When he was gone Monsieur Lamartine sat back in his chair and drummed his fingers for nearly a minute. Then he called up Brousseau.

"He's just gone," he said. "And he starts for St. Boniface tomorrow morning, in spite of all my representations."

He smiled at the sputtering that came over the wire.

* * * * * * *

It was well into the afternoon when Hilary reached St. Boniface on the small tri-weekly mail boat. For fifty or sixty miles below Quebec the country, sparsely inhabited though it is, and primitive, contains settlements with shingled houses, hotels, tourists in season; and it was not until the St. Lawrence widened into the Gulf that Hilary realized, almost with surprise, that the ship was sailing into a territory as primitive as it had been a score of years after Jacques Cartier landed. Something of the primeval nature of the land entered Hilary's heart and gripped it. He had never known what it was he wanted. But he knew now: it was to take hold of a virgin land and tame it, to grapple with life, not among the men of cities, but somewhere with the smell of the pines and of the brown earth in his nostrils. Pacing the deck of the little ship, he felt that his desires had come to light at the moment when their fulfillment had become possible.

He looked about him with approval when he stood upon the porch of the tiny hotel at St. Boniface. Nobody else had got off the boat, and evidently the landlord of the little hotel expected nobody. After an ineffectual attempt to enter into conversation with him, in which hardly a word was mutually intelligible, Hilary gave up the effort and started up the hill road which led, he surmised, toward the lumber mill.

The whole settlement was gathered about the shores of the little bay. Beyond it were the mountains, on either side the forest-clad hills, broken, on the east, by an inlet, and on the west by the deep cleft of the Rocky river, whose mouth, closed by a boom, was a congested mass of logs.

Hilary crossed the bridge and approached the mill. Two or three men, lounging outside the store, looked at him without any sign of interest. Everything was very still and peaceful; there was hardly a sound to be heard except the distant hum of the mill machinery.

Between the dam and the store, upon a terrain heaped with tin cans and miscellaneous debris, were piles of wood in four-foot lengths, each comprising about two hundred cords. Kneeling at the narrow end of one of these piles was a little man, whose clean-shaven upper lip, the whiteness of which contrasted with a sun-blackened face, indicated that a mustache had grown there recently. He was scaling, or measuring, the pile, and muttering as he added up his figures.

Hilary surveyed the lumber. It was unrossed, and most of it was black spruce; there was also some white spruce and a little pine. The mass in the river, if it consisted of wood of the same quality, hardly substantiated Lamartine's statements.

"You seem to have some good spruce on the seigniory," said Hilary.

The little man leaped to his feet, waving his arms. "What you want here?" he demanded. "Strangers are not permitted on the company's property. If you want to buy at the store, you go by the road."

Hilary looked down coolly at the excited little man. "I'm Mr. Askew, and I've come to take charge of my property," he answered.

The little man was bereft of vocal powers for quite some time.

"But Mr. Morris, he ain't here," he gasped at length.

"Well, he ought to be here. That's what I'm paying him for," said Hilary. "What's your name?"

"Jean-Marie Baptiste."

"Perhaps you didn't expect me, Monsieur Baptiste?"

"Holy Name no! It was said that you had sold out to the company."

"What company?" demanded Hilary.

"The company at Ste. Marie. Monsieur Brousseau's company."

"See here, Baptiste," said Hilary, taking the other by the arm. "Let us begin by understanding each other. I know nothing about any company except myself. I own this district, the land, the timber, the mill. Have you got that?"

Jean-Marie gaped again, and then diplomatically disengaged himself.

"I guess you want to see Mr. Connell, the foreman," he said. "It ain't my job. You'll find Mr. Connell in the store."

"Bring him here," said Hilary. "Tell him I'm waiting for him."

The little man departed at a trot, quite evidently startled and scared, and casting back comical looks from time to time over his shoulder as he went.

His statement in the store must have created a good deal of sensation, for presently two clerks, as well as the two loungers, who had gone inside, came to the door and stared. Disengaging himself from among these came the foreman, a tall, lean, lanky New Englander, whose deliberate slouch and typical bearing warmed Hilary's heart instantly. He knew the type, knew it as only one with the New England blood knows his own.

"I'm Lafe Connell, at your service, Mr. Askew," said the foreman, coming up to Hilary and standing respectfully before him.

"I suppose I should have let you people know that I was coming," said Hilary.

He wondered why Lafe Connell whistled; he knew nothing about Brousseau's telephoned warning.

"I guess you'll find things upset a little," said Connell. "Mr. Morris has been away for a couple of weeks, seeing to his other interests, and I can't exactly do much for you till he comes back. It's our slack month, you know, Mr. Askew. The men don't go into the woods until September, and we don't keep a large force employed on the mill work."

"Tomorrow's soon enough to start in," said Hilary. "I'm pleased to have met you, Mr. Connell."

"Wait a minute," said the foreman. "If you don't mind having me, I'll go up to the hotel with you. Maybe there'll be some things that you'll want to ask me."

"All right," said Hilary.

They went together silently across the shaking bridge and ascended the hill, each quietly taking stock of the other. At the top, where a branch road ran off at right angles to that which crested the cliff, a figure on horseback appeared in the distance.

It was a girl, riding side-saddle. As the horse drew near she pulled in to take the branch road without scattering the dust, passing within a few feet of Hilary. He saw that she was about twenty years of age, or a little more, slight, very straight upon the saddle, with gray-blue eyes and brown hair blown by the wind about her flushed cheeks. There was a combination of dignity and simplicity about her, both in her demeanor and in the way she rode, and in her acknowledgment of Connell's greeting.

Hilary watched her canter up the road till she had disappeared among the trees. Then he realized that he had not taken his eyes off her since he had first seen her.

"That," said Lafe, "is Mamzelle

"That," Said Lafe, "Is Mamzelle Madeleine Rosny."

Madeleine Rosny. Her father's what they call the Seigneur."

"The owner of the Chateau?" asked Hilary, although he knew this perfectly.

"Yes, Mr. Askew. I guess she wouldn't have smiled so pleasant if she had known who you was."

"Why, Mr. Connell?"

Lafe jerked his thumb vaguely about the horizon. "Proud old boy," he explained. "Family's been here nigh on a thousand years, I guess—leastways, since them Frenchmen first came to this continent. Hated like thunder to sell out to your uncle. But I guess he was land poor, like the rest of them, and Mamzelle Madeleine must have cost him a mint of money finishing up in the convent at Paris, France."

Hilary turned this over in his mind as they continued their walk along the cliff and then down the road to the hotel. The idea of any personal ill-feeling on the Seigneur's part or on that of his family had not occurred to him. Though he did not expect to meet Monsieur Rosny, except possibly in the course of his business, he was conscious of a feeling of regret, and also of a half-formed resolution, the nature of which he would not admit, to put relations upon a pleasant footing.

In the hotel the landlord's wife was already preparing supper. They ate an omelet, washed down with strong tea and followed by raspberries and cream. Then they went out on the porch and lit their pipes.

"You are the foreman, I understand?" asked Hilary.

"Yes, Mr. Askew. I took the job soon after your uncle bought the timber rights. I'd been up here for the Shoeburyport Gazette, which was looking for a pulp supply. Mr. Morris offered me the job, and I took it. And I've been sorry ever since."

"Why?"

"It's a h—— of a country," answered Lafe frankly. "I never guessed such folks existed in a civilized land before. Now you take a Dutchman or a Dago—their ways ain't our ways, but they're more or less human. These people ain't. They paint their houses yellow and green, when they paint 'em at all. I never saw a yellow house with a green porch in my life till I come up here."

"Just a difference of taste, Mr. Connell."

"Maybe," said Lafe, spitting. "Maybe it's all right not to have sense to plaster their houses, so as to freeze to death in winter time. Maybe it's all right to run to Father Lucy when there's a forest fire, instead of getting to work and putting it out. Maybe he can pray it out for them. I got nothing against the place, except that my wife Clarice and the kids are in Shoeburyport, and I'd rather rot here alone than bring 'em up. But what's the use? I'm here and I got to stay here," he ended, shrugging his shoulders.

Lafe was a bad cross-questioner, and the task put upon him by Brousseau was not only uncongenial but impossible for a man of his temperament. However, he made a valiant attempt to draw Hilary out. "You're thinking of spending some time here, Mr. Askew?" he asked.

"I've come to take charge. I'm going to stay," said Hilary.

Lafe looked at him curiously. What sort of a man could this be who chose of his volition to reside in St. Boniface?

"I guess you'll change your mind when you've seen it a little longer," he said incredulously.

"On the contrary, Mr. Connell, I mean to take hold, and I mean to make it pay. It hasn't paid very well, I understand?"

Lafe floundered. "I've heard it don't pay as much as it ought."

"I understand that most of the timber is below the size at which cutting is allowed?"

Lafe stared at him. "Why, them rules are for government land!" he answered. "You can cut any size on freehold. The timber ain't so bad—leastways, some of it ain't."

Hilary began to think hard. On this point Lamartine had clearly and definitely lied to him.

"Too much fir on the property?" he asked.

"Why, there is some fir," conceded Lafe. "But there's some good spruce along the Rocky river," he added, again oblivious of his instructions.

"I saw a good pile in the river."

"Why, that ain't our cutting—not much of it," said Lafe. "Most of that comes from the Ste. Marie limits."

"Where is Ste. Marie?"

"Ste. Marie's two miles along the coast, beyond our settlement," said Lafe. "Most of our hands come from there. It's a tough place, Mr. Askew. I seen some tough towns in the West, but this has got 'em all beat, with the smuggling of brandy, and the drinking, and the fights every Saturday night—there was a man knifed there last week; and not a policeman within fifty miles, and nobody except Father Lucy, and he can't hold 'em."

"What I want to know," said Hilary, "is, what this company is that you speak about, and how they come to use the Rocky river for their logs."

Lafe hesitated, but only for a moment. Then he mentally cast Brousseau to the winds; for, after all, if Hilary meant to know, nobody could prevent it, Brousseau's instructions notwithstanding.

"It's this way, Mr. Askew," he said. "Mr. Morris and Mr. Brousseau have a company of their own. Their limits touch ours on the west, across the river, and run ten miles or so back into the bush, right alongside ours. They got the right to float their logs down the river."

"And use the mill?"

"Mr. Morris leases the use of our mill by the year to the company."

Hilary was staggered for the moment. Morris, as his uncle's manager, leasing the mill to Morris, a partner in Brousseau's company, seemed a queer role.

"How do they tell our lumber from theirs?" asked Hilary presently.

(Continued Next week)